DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 399 EA 011 831

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TITLE They Left Their Audience Applauding: How One District's Reorganization Efforts Won Approval--and Cheers!
INSTITUTION East Syracuse - Minoa Central Schools, East Syracuse, N.Y.
PUB DATE [79]
NOTE 16p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Board of Education Policy; Boards of Education; Community Involvement; *Community Support; *Cooperative Planning; Declining Enrollment; Educational Planning; *School Closing; School Community Cooperation; School Districts; *School Organization; Teacher Participation
IDENTIFIERS *District Reorganization; East Syracuse Central Schools NY

ABSTRACT

In response to declining enrollment, the school board and administration of the East Syracuse-Minoa Central School District (New York) undertook a comprehensive effort to examine conditions and plan for the future. Following an initial data-gathering phase, a citizens task force was appointed in 1977 to study the problem and make recommendations. In January 1978, a public meeting was held to present task force recommendations and consider public opinion. The citizens group suggested a phased program of reorganization that involved the closing of two elementary and two middle schools. District officials then examined this plan and alternative plans and gathered cost data on each approach. The board of education held a series of work sessions and scheduled a workshop to involve district personnel. By October 1978, the board had narrowed options to three plans. By November 1978, discussions in the school system focused on a program combining elementary grade levels, creating partnerships, and reducing the number of middle schools. A public board meeting was held where the plan presented received strong support. This district response to declining enrollment demonstrated the success possible with a direct and open approach to planning. (Author/JM)

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How One District's Reorganization Efforts Won Approval - and Cheers!

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How One District's Reorganization Efforts Won Approval - and Cheers!

Declining enrollments may be the most important threat to quality in public education. Beside limiting state aid allotments, they create dispersed student populations which make instructional grouping difficult. Correcting the situation often becomes more challenging than maintaining it. Public opposition to school closings has taken a heavy toll of Board Members and administrative staffs throughout the nation.

School districts are attempting to cope with conditions, yet reports have hitherto given little ground for encouragement. The cycle of school closings - followed by voter opposition - followed by school reopenings, has become all too familiar.[1] Amidst these numerous failures, however, stand the successful reorganizations which have taken place. Examination of one of these efforts can lend valuable insights into the management of decline.

The East Syracuse-Minoa Central School District of Upstate New York has, like its neighbor districts, experienced the negative impacts of declining enrollments. Many area systems are still considering possible responses to lower student populations, however, East Syracuse-Minoa has already demonstrated success in dealing with this problem.

Although East Syracuse-Minoa was selected for examination because of its record, rather than its nature, it shares similarities with other school systems. Situated along the eastern periphery of the City of Syracuse, New York, the district is neither wholly urban, nor wholly suburban. The community of East Syracuse is comprised of urban neighborhoods adjoining the City of Syracuse, residential areas which possess a small town atmosphere, and developments resembling first circle suburbs; while the villages which lie at the eastern end of the system are rural communities that have become the settings for the construction of large numbers of one family homes and apartments.

The East Syracuse-Minoa community is a collection of various neighborhoods. In some cases, elementary schools have helped to maintain the identities of individual areas. The older elementary schools, completed in 1930 and 1940 respectively, have served such a function. In other neighborhoods, elementary schools have been superimposed on existing residential configurations.

Post elementary buildings are also distributed through the area covered by the school system. The former East Syracuse High School and a new structure, (1968), served as middle schools housing grades 6-8. The former Minoa High School (1912), accommodated grade 9, while a Central High School, erected during the mid-1960's embraced the upper three grade levels.

Enrollment declines impacted East Syracuse-Minoa in much the same way that they touched public schools across the nation. Aggregate enrollment at East Syracuse-Minoa peaked at 6155 in 1971, while the national K-12 level reached its maximum the previous year. Data and projections indicate that ES-M and national enrollment totals will continue to decline, at least through 1982. Like enrollments at the national level, numbers of students in ES-M elementary grades crested at the close of the 1960's and then slid into a period of decline. Population trends in secondary education at East Syracuse-Minoa also closely approximated the national pattern.[2]

Awareness of the impact of declining enrollments grew slowly in the ES-M area. By 1975, however, the scope of the problem was clear. At that time, the dispersal of elementary students brought about by lower enrollments was already making effective group instruction difficult.

In order to deal with the situation, the Board and administration undertook a comprehensive effort to examine conditions and plan for the future. They were aware that literature on the subject of reorganization suggested three alternative courses of action: rely exclusively on the expertise of the Board and administration and let them make the decision; hire a consultant to sell a plan to the community; or go to the public, propose options, and do a lot of listening.[3] Realizing that no one had a monopoly on knowledge or skills in this area,

the District chose a combined approach which emphasized the third option.

Comprehensive information-gathering was crucial to the success of the planning process. The range of options available to the District could be no wider than the extent of data gained. The research program consisted of two components: one oriented toward instructional patterns, the other toward educational support. Curricular research initially probed such space-related topics as school size, school organizational patterns, class size, and ability grouping. Later, such enrichment-related subjects as the organization of kindergarten classes, development of programs for gifted and talented children, and the elaboration of humanities curricula were also examined. Research relating to educational support concentrated both on facilities and financial support. Inspections were conducted to gather data and opinions of qualified architects were procured and compared. The information-gathering program occurred in conjunction with the assembly of a district-wide master plan for energy conservation, services to the handicapped, and miscellaneous renovations. By combining these two efforts, the school system was able to avoid the expense and program disruption of multiple surveys, while producing a product which incorporated a wide range of needs and considerations.[4]

The basic information-gathering components of the planning program were essentially completed early in September 1977.

At that time the Board solicited nominations for an advisory committee on school district reorganization. Selected from a cross-sectional sampling of the community, this Task Force was asked to assure an organizational pattern that would "maintain the current educational program and be as cost efficient as possible."

Task Force deliberations progressed through the autumn of 1977. Data was examined, Citizens and personnel were questioned. Discussions were conducted. The group soon came to agree with the opinions of other educators who cautioned that enrollment decline was not simply one more problem which could be surmounted through little or no action. The Task Force established that the most immediate problems occasioned by decline were difficulties in maintaining and improving instruction in the elementary grades. Marked improvements in elementary reading levels had been recorded by the District during the 1970's. Since reading was judged to be the most important academic skill for children, Task Force members proved reluctant to endanger the practices which made these gains possible. On the basis of available information, it was concluded that declining enrollments were necessitating the use of undesirable coping strategies by elementary teachers.[5]

The Task Force also gave consideration to the use of enrichment programs to expand educational experiences while also occupying excess space. A former elementary school had been remodeled to house curriculum resource units, as well as a

centralized duplicating center. Another elementary school had been renovated to house the Board of Education meeting rooms, administrative and business offices, and central records. Still another small school had been leased to the county Board of Cooperative Educational Services for use in vocational education. The last remaining former school building, located at the far western end of the district, was in the process of sale to a local fire department. Opportunities for federal and state educational grants might have provided funds and opportunities for development of space. Yet, the District already operated grant programs in reading and mathematics and seemed reluctant to overextend these efforts through the assumption of additional burdens. In many ways, ES-M, thus was a system which had already carried enrichment to its maximum extent.

While the focus of Task Force attention was on curriculum and instruction, important consideration was also given to the impact of declining enrollments on the community, school personnel, space, and fiscal patterns. It was noted that educational structures often formed foci of neighborhood sentiment and activity. It was concluded, however, that the movement of almost all district children to school buildings transformed former neighborhood schools into bussing schools. While examination of data and consultation with personnel revealed that most of any possible employee displacement would be absorbed by retirement and attrition, it was noted that

some loss of positions would inevitably occur. It was judged, however, that if existing instructional levels were to be maintained, personnel would inevitably be affected. Space and financial considerations were also reviewed. Costs of possible approaches were assembled and analyzed.

A meeting was held early in January 1978 to present Task Force recommendations and consider public opinion. At that time, the citizens' group suggested a phased program of reorganization which involved the closing of two elementary schools and two middle schools.

A minority report attached to the Task Force Recommendations, recommended an alternative scheme or reorganization which included the closing of an elementary school because it was "not a community school", and the transfer of students to another building. Impetus for the minority report originated with parents at one school originally targeted for closing.

After receiving the Task Force report, district officials embarked on a wide ranging examination of the plan recommended by the group, as well as a number of alternatives. As an aid to this effort, school administrators accumulated and assembled cost data on each of the approaches to reorganization. Financial information was organized so that cost profiles for new configurations which the Board might devise could be rapidly assembled.

As the ES-M Board itself pursued the response to enrollment declines during 1978, however, the movement which culminated in the passage of California's Proposition 13 merged

with a rising pattern of school budget defeats in 1978 to produce two defeats of East Syracuse-Minoa budget referenda within June 1978 alone. The so-called 'taxpayers revolt' detracted staff time from planning efforts, while inspiring greater attention to cost savings and general efficiency. The postponement of District reorganization created by budget defeats in the East Syracuse-Minoa District was ironic. The public demanded relief from educational expenditures, yet the need to implement short range budgets proved an obstacle to long term reform. East Syracuse-Minoa's 1978-79 operating budget was finally passed late in August 1978, not long before the start of fall classes. With this work completed, school officials returned to the process of reorganization.

In order to facilitate the planning process, the Board of Education scheduled a series of working sessions exclusively for development of a definitive course of action. As part of this approach, the Board and administration also scheduled a workshop for the involvement of District personnel within the reorganization effort. The gathering included presentations by administrators and forums for small group discussions. Analysis of staff responses gained at the workshop made it clear that staff were well aware of the reasons for and the difficulties of reorganization. Teachers agreed that the principal consideration in the process should be maintenance of the existing instructional programs. The results of the

Superintendent's workshop, as well as the Task Force recommendations and other information which had been collected, were used by the East Syracuse-Minoa Board of Education to define further possible approaches to reorganization. In order to further facilitate public contact with the decision-making process, some Board meetings were scheduled at individual schools throughout the District.

Through extended hours of research and considerations, school officials narrowed the options. Above all, the issue of the elementary schools remained. During October 1978, the Board concluded that declining elementary enrollments necessitated the implementation of one of three approaches.

The first would have closed two elementary schools as well as the Administration Building and the Resource Center. Operations of the latter two facilities would have been moved to a vacated elementary building. The second approach would have combined elementary grade levels and created 'partnerships', as well as reduced the number of middle schools in the district from 3 to 1. The third alternative embodied various concepts. It contained the second alternative's provision for closing two middle schools. In order to facilitate grouping for instruction at the District's elementary schools, this approach would have also assigned all K-5 students at one elementary school to the other four elementary buildings, and made the vacated structure a sixth grade building.[6]

In November 1978, discussions in the school system ulti-

mately focused on the second alternative's philosophy of partnership arrangements. It was judged that the partnership concept, together with the closing of two middle schools, would enhance the provision of quality, efficient instruction to pupils. Upon further consideration of the second option, the Board concluded that the partnership arrangement in the eastern part of the District should be implemented with an existing elementary and a vacated middle school building, rather than with two elementary schools. The gymnasium at one elementary school was known to be in need of renovations costing $100,000, while both classroom and athletic facilities at the middle school were known to be of generally superior quality. Of major importance was the plan's flexibility to accommodate enrollment increases. By raising building enrollments moderately, the District corrected instructional difficulties at the elementary level without risking the possibility of repeating the entire process in reverse when elementary student populations would begin to rise again.

A public Board meeting was scheduled in mid-December to consider adoption of the reorganization program. Notices were dispatched and newspapers contacted to insure that even those who had not demonstrated an interest in previous elements of the process would know that a final decision was near. For two painstaking hours on December 5, 1978, the East Syracuse-Minoa Board scrupulously considered the product of over 18 months of preparation for reorganization. Board members and

district administrators answered public questions, rebutted objections and defended the plan. Many of the comments offered reflected the weight of effort and responsibility that were coming to bear. A resident argued "You're destroying the elementary schools, ... you're destroying everything we've worked for". Board President Marilyn Peet affirmed, "We don't feel ... that we are doing anything that will be harmful to the educational process". Taxpayers questioned "Are we going to see a direct (monetary) result of reorganization?" Superintendent Fritz Hess summarized, "There is no ideal plan." At the conclusion of the discussion, the Board member who had dissented throughout the reorganization discussions approached the microphone and urged all present to support the effort. He voiced what seemed to be the consensus of the group, that the plan was the best possible. A local newspaper noted that, "The Board members (then) closed their discussions and approved the plan - and they left their audience applauding."[7]

The timing of the Board's decision was particularly advantageous. Coming in December 1978, it allowed ample time for staffing and facility adjustments necessary to carry out the move, and permitted the District's budgeting process, which begins annually during December and January, to incorporate the approved changes. Many school officials had speculated that, despite the ceaseless efforts to apprise the public of events concerning reorganization, negative reaction

might be delayed until after word of the move appeared in local newspapers. When public reaction to the Board's move did appear, however, it was laudatory rather than negative in content. An open letter written by parents in a nearby district praised the East Syracuse-Minoa Board for squarely facing the issues and taking needed action. District officials were widely congratulated for the wisdom and courage they exhibited.

East Syracuse-Minoa Central Schools' response to declining enrollments was more than a stop-gap measure. It was a stunning success for positive planning. Reorganization involved a complicated effort which spanned over 18 months. Each step was carefully approached and surmounted. In some cases, moves already taken were reconsidered and reversed.

The East Syracuse-Minoa experience supports the use of moderate amounts of planning. The District's Board Members and administrators were cognizant of the need for planning, yet they knew that the process could be overdone. Accordingly, they kept their approach as simple as possible and stayed away from methods which proposed extended efforts.

Much of the rapidity of the East Syracuse-Minoa experience was made possible by the directness and openness of the approach selected. From the start of the process the importance of two priorities, educational quality and cost efficiency, was made clear. The urgent need for instructional grouping in the elementary schools, and the prospect of it in the intermediate grades,

suggested possible configurations of reorganization. Financial considerations supported some of these approaches and became the deciding factor in the closing of an elementary school.

Perhaps most significantly, East Syracuse-Minoa officials never lost touch with the reality of their situation. They were aware that similar approaches to reorganization had been discussed and rediscussed, yet they also knew what William F. Keough summarized when he wrote that "viewing these decline management needs in the late-evening quiet of the Superintendent's office while "taking stock" is easy; acting upon them in the midst of the relentlessly-demanding school day is difficult."[8]

Reorganization at East Syracuse-Minoa may yet contain additional chapters. Although the revised plan retains some excess capacity for enrollment reexpansion, changed conditions could modify the setup. From the present standpoint, however, the new organization is an impressive achievement. It represents a response to declining enrollments which itself should prove responsive to new developments.

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